

The last word "P.C." hysteria

by the editors

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Originally, we used the term "politically correct" or "P.C." in the left and feminist movements to chide and gently mock those who held a "holier than thou" attitude in their political positions. In the past year academic conservatives, politicians including George Bush, and some of the media have appropriated the term "p.c." They are using it to attack a wide range of recent higher education activities including affirmative action plans for students and faculty, campus regulations intended to prevent ethnic and sexual harassment, and new multicultural curricula.

They have created the alarming impression that our universities have fallen under the control of authoritarian leftists, feminists, people of color, and gay and lesbian activists. Supposedly these progressives are busily imposing unamerican ideologies on students and intimidating those who object. We can easily see in this frenzied rhetoric the familiar tactics of demonizing and the Big Lie. With these highly emotional arguments such critics using the term "p.c." are trying to open up a space in colleges for bigotry and increased repression of people working for change.

Looked at carefully, this campaign against "political correctness," reveals itself as a new justification for hysterical race and gender stereotyping. At Northwestern University, for example, a professor claims in the student newspaper that freshman orientation discussions intended to increase awareness of cultural differences constitute a form of "brainwashing," worse than that practiced on U.S. prisoners during the Korean War. Conservative ideologue Dinesh D'Souza, recently on the talk-show circuit promoting his book, *Illiberal Education*, writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that homosexual students, among other groups, receive preference in college admission.

It's easy enough to dismiss such fevered fantasies, but in some areas the conservatives have hit a responsive chord among many moderate faculty and students. Particularly in the area of free speech, campus communities have traditionally and justifiably concerned themselves with protecting and promoting a broad range of expression. By playing up some extreme cases, conservatives have

enlisted the concern of a broader group. But the free speech issue is deceptive. On the surface it appears to be about First Amendment rights. This is what the right has trumpeted.

Below the surface lie the drastically changing demographics of higher education and major changes taking place in U.S. social life. At the end of this decade white men will be a minority of those entering the work force. College educated women increasingly expect to have careers competitive with men. People of color are a more visible and active presence on campus and in public life. Many lesbian and gay students and some faculty are out and are outspoken. In many cities the gay and lesbian communities have become an important political force. Mediocre, straight white men, who in the past would have been carried along on their privilege, are the big losers in these changes. Now, those young white men who do not have the talent and perseverance to compete will fall to the wayside. And academic disciplines that have been male preserves will just have to change.

College administrators already find it necessary to increase student awareness of diversity and promote tolerance. On campuses where hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of new students arrive every fall to start living the culture mix of the future with their peers, orientation sessions on offensive speech simply take their place along with those on choosing a major, drug and alcohol policy, sexually transmitted disease prevention, or date rape. While a few horror stories can be trotted out to alarm First Amendment absolutists, in fact, there's not much of substance to support the idea that campus free speech is menaced by such administrative policy. Free speech worriers could better direct their attention to high schools and the military services if they want to find unreasonable restrictions on speech.

The arch-reactionary National Association of Scholars runs ads that denounce special admissions programs in colleges. These ads read as if it were common practice to admit unqualified students of color to fill minority admission quotas. Actually, athletes and the children and relatives of alums and large donors make up the largest number of students given special consideration when they apply but fall below admission standards. Of course, since conservatives support the results of these two exceptions, the hypocritical NAS studiously ignores this much more prevalent imbalance. The NAS calls for a meritocracy, but it carefully avoids mentioning that if merit were strictly followed in admissions, many more high school women would be admitted than men based on GPAs and college test scores.

In an earlier editorial we outlined some of the major structural shifts influencing curriculum change in higher education ("Disharmonic Convergence," JUMP CUT 34). Shifts from liberal arts to business and communication curricula are irreversible in the long run. Capitalism will continue to function efficiently in the face of changing workforce demographics and transnational economics. And this efficient functioning demands that managers themselves be multiculturally sophisticated, liberal about gender politics, and media literate as well as fluent in print culture.

Ironically, one result of this new and noisy assault from the Right may turn out to

be a new-found solidarity among beleaguered progressives. Frequently fragmented and divided by old quarrels and factionalism, the very feministmarxist-Third World-gay/lesbian-media-studies conspiracy conjured up by the Right may in fact unite us now that we face a common enemy. We see some evidence that past divisiveness and isolation are being overcome. Certainly more leaders are calling for a sensible coalition politics to face the Right. But this will not happen without considerable work on our part.

We can't simply trust to history to make everything work out. Today's 18-22 year old undergraduates were ages 6-10 when Reagan took office. Their experiences and the media representations they've grown up with differ drastically from earlier generations. The counterculture spirit of the 60s (now a quarter century past) becomes today's drug and alcohol abuse warning of THE DOORS. The Civil Rights Movement becomes lobotomized into DRIVING MISS DAISY or totally rewritten as MISSISSIPPI BURNING.

It's not surprising then that many students today are profoundly skeptical of and sometimes hostile to the rhetoric of progressive movements from the past. Though our causes are still just and our grievances still active, we have lost much mass support. It is becoming clear that there is a dialectical relation between social movements and the languages they create. The language speaks the movement and the movement gives explanatory force to the language. We need to remind ourselves of the old organizer's rule of thumb: Start where they are at and not where you wish they were.

The progressive movements that grew out of the 1960s and developed through the 1970s and 80s never really developed a unified theory of class, race, and gender, nor a unified practice of activism around class/ race/ gender. We see the need for both this kind of theory and this kind of practice, while respecting attempts to present the multiplicity of consciousness for change. Cultural activists, theorists, artists, students of change may have the most crucial contribution to make here. Strictly political thinking hasn't taken us as far as we need to go. A politics which recognizes culture and consciousness and the multiple subjectivities of individuals and movements can move us further.

In many colleges across the country, students of color and gays and lesbians, in particular, want to demand a curriculum that represents their experience and grant them full visibility. Black students justly want more taught about African American culture and history than the story of victimization, with its emphasis on slavery. Many students of color suspect the canon, with its focus on hegemonic Euro-American culture and such keystone courses as "Western Civilization." The Right's offensive against curricular change is really a demand that formerly "invisible" (to them) concerns go back to seeming invisible. For example, feminist students and teachers find that their demands to avoid sexist language in the classroom still meet overt putdowns. Women's, gays', and people of color's demands for a more just curriculum need active, imaginative support from progressive faculty and administration. When those who shape the dominant culture, especially educators, consistently elicit underrepresented groups' analyses about educational

institutions, we all have a chance to learn something new about what we teach and what we have been taught.

The Right will always enact a schizophrenic pattern of calling for individual liberty while also slavishly upholding authority. Their campaign against "political correctness" is wrapped in the flag they don't want burned and tied with an imperialist yellow ribbon. Their version of "free speech" never mentions U.S. Government control and manipulation of Gulf War news. It's not hard to challenge the Right's flimsy argument not, of course, on the basis of political correctness, but with common sense and logic.

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